



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A



The Canaanite Woman: Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry, Folio 164r
The Canaanite Woman the Musée Condé, Chantilly.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2. Use the prayer provided below.

Act of Hope

*For Your mercies' sake, O Lord my God,
tell me what You are to me.
Say to my soul: "I am your salvation."
Speak that I may hear, O Lord;
my heart is listening;
open it that it may hear You,
and say to my soul: "I am your salvation."
After hearing this word,
may I come in haste to take hold of you.
Hide not Your face from me.
Let me see Your face even if I die,
lest I die with longing to see it.
The house of my soul is too small to receive You;
let it be enlarged by You.
It is all in ruins;
Repair it, dear Lord.
There is much that offends You.
Who shall cleanse my soul but You?
I cry out only to You; who else is there?
From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord,
and from those of others spare your servant.*

Adaptation of a prayer by St. Augustine of Hippo

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today's liturgy highlights the universality of God's salvation.
- ▶ There are no strangers in God's kingdom. All people have a place in God's plan of salvation for the world.
- ▶ Christians are called to extend God's own hospitality to friends, neighbors, family members, immigrants and even our enemies -- in other words, to everyone.
- ▶ Liturgy exhorts all believers to extend God's agape love to every person.
"Christian faith without tolerance is not faith at all. It is self-righteous arrogance. Liturgy demands that we seriously look at those who today we refuse to call our neighbor." (Birmingham, Word and Worship Workbook, Year A, Paulist Press, 1999, 482).
- ▶ "Neighbor," according to the Biblical imperative, is not just the person who shares the same locale; one's neighbor is every human person that draws breath on this planet—the human village. Awareness of this truth was a slow process that took place over the entire spectrum of salvation history as a result of God's grace and Christ's saving power. Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe--of every human person.
- ▶ When early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper, failure to extend God's own hospitality to others was a serious breach of the ethical demands of the New Covenant.
- ▶ Thus, today's focus rightly reminds us of the universal mission of Christ's Church in the world.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, or word from the homily spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

- ▶ Even though today's reading comes from the third section of Isaiah called Trito-Isaiah, it reflects the teaching of Second Isaiah and, as such, takes place after the exile.
- ▶ In this section Isaiah exalts the mighty power of God who saves his people.
- ▶ The prophet exalts the God who led his people out of slavery to freedom in order to live in justice and righteousness.
- ▶ After the exile King Cyrus gave permission for the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. He even gave them the vessels that had been stolen by the Babylonians. The exiles were thrilled at the prospects of rebuilding the temple, even though that did not begin for another fifteen years after their return.
- ▶ Today's reading takes place after the rebuilding had begun and before the restoration of Judaism had begun under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

- ▶ Even though there had been prophetic promises of joy surrounding the return from exile, it was anything but joyful. Poverty was widespread, recovery was slow and unstable political circumstances put a damper on what should have been a happy event.
- ▶ Adding insult to injury was the influx of immigrants who intermarried and thus subjected the community to foreign idols and practices.
- ▶ Ezra and Nehemiah insisted that such forces contaminated Judaism and thus they returned to strict laws concerning intermarriage, devotional life and daily religious observances.
- ▶ Today's reading focuses on how foreigners should behave near the temple environs.
- ▶ Previously Ezekiel insisted that uncircumcised foreigners were not allowed access to the temple. Third Isaiah set forth the conditions under which a foreigner could serve the temple. They were instructed to observe the Law and the covenant and to keep holy the Lord's Sabbath.
- ▶ Prior to the exile God was uniquely tied to the land—God was understood as residing in and for Israel. The exile widened their horizons and helped them to see that God could not be isolated to a place. God was a God of foreigners as well as for Israelites.
- ▶ Ezra and Nehemiah, concerned that syncretization would destroy Judaism, set out to restore a rigid adherence to the Law and religious observances and practices, thus setting back the universalist approach to God by several centuries.
- ▶ The theme of universality in today's reading looks forward to the universal message of salvation in the gospel.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a brief story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ Do you believe that God's salvation is for everyone? Are there people who are not eligible for God's salvation? What does this reading suggest?
- ▶ How does this reading speak to the issues surrounding immigrants in today's world?
- ▶ What are the implications of this reading for your life? What is the challenge?
- ▶ What attitudes does this reading challenge? What attitudes that you possess does this reading challenge?

Second Reading: Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32

- ▶ Paul also addresses the theme of universality of Christ's mission in today's reading.
- ▶ Paul reaches out to the non-Israelite who came to faith in Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Even though the call of faith was offered first to the Jews, it was the foreigner

who in actuality embraced the call—not the Jewish community.

- ▶ The Jewish community remained faithful to the old covenant that was forged with Moses and the Israelites. They believed that the old covenant could not be renounced, thus preventing them from embracing the truth that Christ was the long-awaited Messiah.
- ▶ Paul was a faithful Jew who understood his primary mission to be apostle to the gentiles. He longed for the day that his Jewish brothers and sisters would come to faith in Christ.
- ▶ He never lost hope that the Jews would find their way to Christ. Thus as he moved through the region spreading the Good News, he always preached his message first to the Jews, then to the gentiles.
- ▶ In today's pericope Paul insists that we are all sinners and that all who come to faith in Christ do so as a result of God's grace and mercy.
- ▶ Calling upon God's incredible grace, Paul believes that his Jewish brothers and sisters will eventually come to faith in Christ. All people will be beneficiaries of Christ's saving mission.
- ▶ God's love is freely given to the entire world. It cannot be earned—it is completely and totally gratuitous.
- ▶ All people are heirs to Christ's saving death and resurrection.
- ▶ It behooves each and every one of us to embrace what God has accomplished through the mission of his Son Jesus Christ.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a brief story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What do we have to “do” to be saved according to Paul's perspective?
- ▶ What are the implications for us today when we consider the fact that the Israelites missed what God was doing in Christ?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that God's grace cannot be earned?
- ▶ In what way do we commonly live as though we believe we have to earn God's grace?

Gospel: Matthew 15: 21-28

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ We are taken aback by Jesus' response to the woman in Jesus' repartee with her in today's Gospel. We expect a more compassionate response from him.
- ▶ Jesus ignores her request for help. The disciples want her to leave. Jesus tells her that his mission is only to the lost house of Israel.
- ▶ The woman approaches Jesus with more assertiveness, passion and fervor. She worships him.
- ▶ Rather than respond with heartfelt compassion, Jesus surprises us and responds with an insult.
- ▶ Mark's Gospel tells the story with the caveat and hope that salvation would come to the gentiles after embraced by the House of Israel.
- ▶ Matthew offers no similar consideration.
- ▶ We hear that the woman was a Canaanite. Canaanites were considered apostates from the faith. When Cana was invaded, the people succumbed to the false gods brought by the invaders as they settled the land. The elite, educated class was exiled. The peasant class that remained syncretized with the new emerging culture. Even though they remained faithful to the God of Israel, in an effort to get along with their new neighbors, they flirted with the pagan gods brought by the invaders.
- ▶ It is for this reason that the prophets of old called Canaanites God's enemies and thus were considered pagans.
- ▶ Matthew is clear: the woman in this story is a pagan. Matthew asks: will pagans be allowed to supersede Judaism and approach Christ directly?
- ▶ Jesus and the woman enter into a clever repartee: "It is not right to take the food of the sons and daughters and throw it to the dogs." The woman tells Jesus that dogs only eat the scraps that naturally fall from their master's table and thus the children hardly go hungry. Both the dogs and the children are adequately fed.
- ▶ The woman affirms Israel's rightful assertion that they are the primary heirs of God's salvation. She simply asks that the grace God rightly bestowed to Israel spill over to her.
- ▶ Jesus assured her that indeed God would gift her with that grace. He was astonished at the woman's amazing humility and her faith.
- ▶ The primary focus here is the woman's faith. Jesus is truly amazed. She was confident that Jesus was the hoped-for Messiah and would respond to her request.
- ▶ Her faith is illustrated in contrast to those who had little faith (Peter and the disciples).

- ▶ For some people this Gospel seems troublesome at first glance. How could Jesus show such little compassion to the woman? How could he refer to her as a dog—a common racial slur hurled against pagans (dogs, pagans and non-Jews were all considered unclean)? Was Jesus participating in common racial bigotry of the day?
- ▶ Some scholarship suggests that there is another underlying theme taking place in this encounter. Tyre, a more privilege area, was monopolizing the food stores of the area. It is possible that Jesus was speaking for the poor—they should feast at table before the more privileged members of society.
- ▶ Jesus' understanding of "unclean" has little to do with a person's status, sex or class. What makes a person unclean according to Jesus in another chapter is what comes from within the person. Jesus insists that it is what comes out of a person's mouth that makes him or her unclean.
- ▶ When considering this text we are exhorted to remember that Matthew is speaking to a primarily Jewish audience. He could not deny that gentiles seemed to have a more prominent role in the new reign of God established by Jesus. But Matthew is trying to affirm, convince and convert his primarily Jewish audience. His point is not to be missed:
 - God still holds the people of Israel in great esteem—Jesus affirms God's mission to the House of Israel.
 - The Canaanite woman expressed the faith that Israel should have possessed. She affirmed Jesus as the Christ—the long-awaited Messiah from the House of David.
 - All the feeding stories in Scripture attest to the truth that God feeds and provides not only for Israel but also for all people.
 - All people must come to faith. Yes, faith is freely given and salvation extended, but it must be accepted in faith.
 - Jesus' mission is primarily to the Jews but after his death and resurrection it will be offered to all people in the world.
- ▶ The woman reminds us to be persistent in our faith, to boldly seek relief from God with an expectant heart.
- ▶ The woman's love for her daughter compelled her to approach Christ with the faith that he could provide what her daughter deserved—a chance for a life lived to the fullest.
- ▶ God rewards her faith in God's benevolence.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example.

- ▶ Have you [or anyone you know] ever shown similar “spunk” or courage in seeking after something you [or they] knew was right for you [or them]?
- ▶ What would your response have been if someone like Jesus had responded to you in the same way he responded to the woman in this story?
- ▶ What does the woman teach us about such an encounter?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about faith?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about the universal mission of Jesus?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel?
- ▶ How might you practically apply this to your everyday life?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat the OPENING PRAYER for this session

APPENDIX

► What does this Gospel teach us about faith?

Faith is an amazing gift from God. It is completely gratuitous. We can accept or reject the faith we have been given. Just when I think I have this “faith” thing down, I am challenged again and again to apply it to every circumstance in my life.

I recently was the recipient of an incredible medical miracle. My son donated his kidney and I was given a new lease on life. The circumstances came together in such a way as there is no doubt that God ordained the entire process. My doctor told me that never had he seen kidney deterioration occur simultaneously with everything being cleared for surgery. The timing was such that had it not taken place when it did, the outcome could have been severely compromised. At the last minute the transplant doctors wanted to postpone my surgery due to another troublesome medical issue that cropped up, but chose not to because my son was already on his way from Ireland and they considered it too great a hardship. As a result they opted not to remove my existing kidneys that would have made the surgery even more major than it already was. Three days after my surgery, a disgruntled patient murdered my amazing compassionate, loving, skilled, and noted surgeon. My surgery was the last surgery he performed. While we have all grieved over the loss of this wonderful man and we pray for him and his family trusting that they are all in God’s hands, I marvel that I was graced to be his patient. It is just another example of God’s benevolence. So many miraculous events surrounded this surgery, the greatest for me being the peace and faith and presence that God provided through it all.

While recovering from this medical miracle our faith has once again been tested. Over and over again we are called to trust in God’s care for our family. Once again that call has come to our doorstep. My son-in-law has MS and last year lost vision in one eye. He is the father of my precious grandchildren, a two year-old little boy and twin six-month old girls. Last week he experienced a flare-up in his good eye. Rather than approach the situation with immediate faith I was gripped with fear.

I began to pray and ask for the same gift of faith I received before my surgery. Like the Canaanite woman and having regained my wits, I stood back and petitioned God to take over. We did not know what to do or where to turn. We prayed and God acted. We asked God that precious time not be wasted and that we be led to the right place. Multiple signs were placed in our path and we were led to a medical center that specializes in his particular illness. Once again, the God of timing put the necessary pieces together and my son-in-law is heading for a place that specializes in his disorder.

I continue to pray for the grace to trust that God will walk with him, with my daughter and with all of us—just as he has walked with us in my medical journey of faith. Faith is truly a gift, but it is a gift that must be accepted, embraced and acted upon. I marvel at our precious God of timing who walks with us in the challenges of life. God, however, invites us to be as persistent in prayer as the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Ecumenism
Miracles
Anointing of the Sick
Catholic Social Teaching
Faith

Scripture and Revelation I or II
Life Issues
Liturgical Year
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well. Choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

ECUMENISM

Today's liturgy is a call to remember that Christ's message of salvation is universal. We are called to preach Jesus Christ to the world. We are called to reach out in mutual love and respect to those of other faith traditions. Jesus reached out to the pagan woman after she persisted in her request for healing. He healed her and offered her salvation. She showed great faith even though she was not an Israelite. It is thus a most fitting opportunity to explore what our church teaches about what our response should be in relation to other faith traditions. We will focus our doctrinal session on ECUMENISM.

MIRACLES

Today's liturgy is a good opportunity to reflect on the miracles of Jesus. Jesus healed the Canaanite woman who showed great faith. Her faith is contrasted with the faith of Peter who doubted. Her faith prompted Jesus to act. He healed her—he performed a miracle. Jesus demonstrated his divine power and his identity through his miraculous act of healing the woman. It is thus fitting that we focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about MIRACLES.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK.

Jesus healed the Canaanite woman who showed great faith. Her faith is contrasted with the faith of Peter who doubted. Her faith prompted Jesus to act. He healed her of her illness. Jesus demonstrated his divine power and his identity through his miraculous act of healing the woman. We all have moments in our lives where we call upon God in faith to heal us. That same cry goes forth today when we come before God asking to be healed of our illnesses and strengthened to remain steadfast and not lost heart or faith in the midst of illness. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about the sacrament of ANOINTING OF THE SICK.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The story of the healing of the Canaanite woman is a reminder of all the outcast peoples in our world who deserve our respect. It is a call to treat them with utmost dignity. It is also a reminder that such groups should themselves be persistent in seeking relief from their misery. The woman shows great courage to speak out for herself and in so doing pave the ways for others. Her faith and her persistence are rewarded. We are reminded of the human dignity of all groups of peoples-- the hallmark of our social teaching. It is thus fitting that we explore what the Church teaches about CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

FAITH

The Canaanite woman demonstrated great faith—faith that Jesus rewarded. He was so touched by her faith that he healed her. It is most fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about FAITH.

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

Jesus is the revelation of God. Through his miracles he reveals God to us. That revelation continues in God's revealed, holy word. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II.

LIFE ISSUES

The Canaanite woman was healed in today's Gospel. Ultimately an outcast woman was healed by Jesus—a woman not treated with respect and human dignity in her world. The Church teaches that the dignity of all must be upheld from womb to tomb. If we uphold every person's equality and dignity in the eyes of God we must hold and uphold that all life is sacred—from womb to tomb. Thus today is an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about LIFE. Today's doctrinal session will focus on LIFE ISSUES.

LITURGICAL YEAR

It is a most appropriate time to address what we celebrate in the unfolding liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. It is thus most appropriate as the early days of the new liturgical year begin that we address what the Church teaches about the LITURGICAL YEAR.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.